

Merry-Go-Rounds and Galvanized Steel

by Rick Reil

It's no secret that playground equipment in the 1900s could be dangerous. Just ask my friend Peter Moore. It was about 1958 and Peter loved the big slide at Riverside Park in Richland, Washington. The slide was about thirty feet tall. A single ladder led to a galvanized steel platform that was about three by four feet in area. There were three slides to choose from on that platform, each a little different in profile. Peter climbed to the top of the platform and fell off and landed on his head. Fortunately, Peter is, and was hardheaded so he lived. The city wasn't too concerned, and the slide remained in place until the 1980s.

Sometime in the 70s the name of the park was changed from Riverside Park to Howard Amon Park. The change was made to honor the respected and loved city founder.

There were other slides as well, big, huge ones and they were built to survive a direct nuclear blast. Richland was the bedroom community to the Hanford Reservation where the plutonium was manufactured for the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki Japan in 1945. Up until the 1970s the government just kept on making more plutonium so the U.S. would have plenty of atomic weapons in case the Soviets decided to start a nuclear war, it was part of a program call "nuclear deterrence". That wasn't too much of a concern for a bunch of little kids who enjoyed playing at Riverside Park. We just knew that our playground equipment would last forever.

In addition to the slides were the giant swing sets. These were at least twenty feet high. The chains holding the seats were industrial size as well. The links were the size of donuts, or should I say "spudnuts," since that is the preferred pastry in Richland. The seats were made of half-inch steel and coated in a layer of inch and a half heavy rubber. These were the finest swings in the world. You could swing so high that you could feel the temperature difference from the altitude change.

There was always someone to dare you to jump out of the seat when the swing was at its apex. Dares were taken seriously in those days. I am sure a few broken legs and arms were forthcoming from the many brave souls who dared not incur the humiliation of being called a "sissy."

Monkey bars and cross bars were to be enjoyed as well. As with most of the playground equipment, galvanized steel was the preferred material of choice. It was the philosophy of the day that if you're going to do something "do it right the first time." Make it last, let its design contribute to much needed life's lessons. If you couldn't make it across the cross bars just let

go, it was only twelve feet to the ground. The thought of a drop that far was a great incentive to tough it out and make it across. If you slipped on the monkey bars the worst that might happen was losing a tooth or two. Alfred E. Neuman of Mad Magazine was doing fine with a missing tooth and so could you. If you didn't have all your teeth, you knew that at 18 years old, you'd have a better chance of getting into the Marines.

The wading pool in the summer, what fun. Who had ever heard of e. coli? Besides if it was hot and you were in the pool with the other 200 kids who would ever figure out that it was you who peed in the pool? Beside the restrooms were a long walk away.

What was really fun was to get all the kids walking in a big circle the same way. It took a bit of doing but if you worked hard enough you could turn the pool into a giant whirlpool. It was fun to see the real little kids get swept off their feet by the oncoming tidal waves. Lifeguards? There were none, who was going to worry about some kid drowning in a foot and a half of water. In fact, in all the years the pool existed there were only a few fatalities.

We had giant teeter-totters too. Yup, galvanized steel and industrial rubber too. They were about 30 feet long. This meant that the kid on the end in the air was about 20 feet up. Of course, if you were bigger than him, you'd just leave him up there until he started screaming to be let down. Nobody wants to get in trouble for leaving a little kid screaming up in the air. Best solution? Just hop of the "down" end and he'd quit screaming when the 20-foot fall knocked the wind out of him.

And now we'll discuss the king of all the playground equipment, the Merry-Go-Round. What fun it was. No other piece of equipment could come close to matching the excitement of this marvel of steel tubing, galvanized sheeting, and a great big bearing. It would hold about twenty-five kids with some measure of safety but usually on a nice summer day would it have about fifty jammed aboard.

It was powered by whoever were the biggest kids around. Rarely were there any adults present, but when there was it was usually some kid's dad who would rev it up to about a hundred rpm. This would generate at least 4g's. You had to hang on for dear life. If you let go you would be ejected or worse yet, get dragged around in the dirt and gravel until the thing stopped. It was a good thing that the wading pool was close, it was a good place to clean off the blood and dirt.

It was common knowledge and accepted by most people of the day, that if you got hurt playing on the playground equipment at Riverside Park you deserved it for not being careful. You would heal and maybe grow up to be a lawyer like Peter Moore, or maybe join the Marines.

Today the park is home to "safe" toys. Boring as they may be, no kid's going to get hurt. It may be because of the design or maybe because it's impossible to get fifty kids on the little bridge

that crosses of sea of safe blue plastic balls designed to cushion a fall from the dizzy height of three feet. It might also be because many kids would rather be playing video games at home or needing to wait for an adult to supervise them at some sport on a professionally designed playing field.

I miss the swings, I miss the slides, I miss the Merry-Go-Ground, I miss the teeter-totter, I don't miss the pool.

The End